

A Subliminal Dr. Strangelove

Mind: Using the power of hidden suggestions, this Russian scientist tries to rewire the brain

WHEN BRANCH DAVIDIAN SECT MEMBERS hunkered down in their Waco compound last year and threatened to commit suicide, the FBI turned to an unlikely source. Experts from the FBI Counter-Terrorism Center secretly met in Arlington, Va., with a long-haired Russian Dr. Strangelove called Igor Smirnov. His plan: piping subliminal messages from sect members' families through the phone lines during negotiations. For David Koresh, the self-appointed prophet, the FBI had a special voice in mind: God, as played by Charlton Heston.

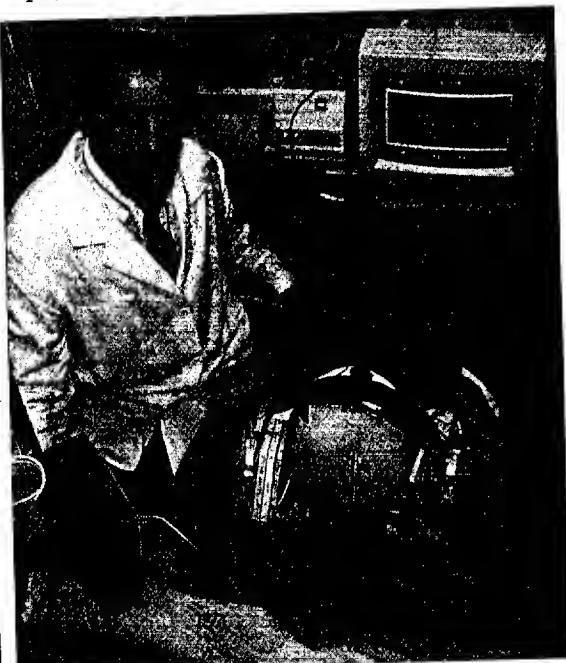
your throat." In the wrong hands, he explains, his techniques could push people into violent acts.

Using electroencephalographs, he measures brain waves, then uses computers to create a map of the subconscious and various human impulses, such as anger or the sex drive. Then, through taped subliminal messages, he claims to physically alter that landscape with the power of suggestion. At the University of Michigan, Howard Shevrin has also studied the relationship between brain responses and the unconscious, but he has doubts about therapeutic applications. "I'm not sure this should be tampered with. The effects could be harmful."

In Smirnov's cluttered lab, Slava, a tattooed heroin addict, has electrodes attached to his chest and shaved head. He has just watched subliminal messages on a screen and listened through earphones to other impulses disguised as noise. Smirnov says he's trying to stimulate the child-rearing cluster of Slava's brain to encourage him to care more for his soon-to-be-born baby and less about his next hit of heroin.

Smirnov says that in Soviet times, the government funded his lab generously. Now that Russia's economy has collapsed, and with it funding for the security forces and military, Smirnov gets only \$20,000 a year, he says. He hopes to attract Western investment. Meanwhile, Smirnov says that Russian gangsters regularly come to see him, looking, for example, for help in getting business partners to sign contracts that are against their interest. He won't do it, he says: "That would be unethical." In any case, there is no doubt that somebody is watching him closely. Shortly after NEWSWEEK's reporter visited his lab, two burly toughs in suits and diamond rings showed up at NEWSWEEK's Moscow office asking questions about Smirnov. They claimed to be in business with him, but he says he doesn't know them. KGB? Mafia? Smirnov shrugs them off, but, whoever they are, the doctor of subliminal subversion might be wise to watch his back.

DORINDA ELLIOTT in Moscow with
JOHN BARRY in Washington



ANDY HERNANDEZ FOR NEWSWEEK

Virtual reality It's not: Smirnov in his lab

The FBI backed out of Smirnov's Waco strategy, and the crisis ended in blazing disaster. But psychological-warfare experts on all sides still dream that they will one day control the enemy's mind. And in a tiny, dungeonlike lab in the basement of Moscow's ominously named Institute of Psycho-Correction, Smirnov and other Russian psychiatrists are already working on schizophrenics, drug addicts and cancer patients.

You've heard of subliminal advertising, right? The psychiatric community generally agrees that subliminal perception exists; a smaller fringe group believes it can be used to change the psyche. And that could be bad as well as good. "A knife can be used to cut sausage," Smirnov warns cryptically, "or cut